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## Disaster Movies vs. Real Emergencies: What Can Audiences Learn?

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By Al Berman | Sep 17, 2015

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If Hollywood is good at one thing, it's putting wholesale destruction up on the big screen to thrill audiences. But is there anything disaster movies can teach us? Let's take a look at how the movies handle some potentially very real emergency situations and see what actual preparedness and business continuity lessons can be learned from them.

### **Pandemics**

#### *In the Movies:*

All it takes is one stray cough for a pandemic to break out in a disaster movie – whether in a crowded theater or on a trans-continental flight, the doomsday scenario has begun. Soon hospitals and pharmacies are overwhelmed by demands. As more and more people become infected and casualties start to mount, heroic researchers race against time to identify the disease and work up a vaccine. But while that's going on, it's chaos in the streets as a panicked public fears a terror attack and the social order breaks down. In some worst-case scenarios, the outbreak leads to a whole new problem: a zombie apocalypse! As the infected become part of a shambling hoard of the undead, then survivors must hunt for supplies, weapons, and safe shelter while they wait for an improbably handsome leading man to uncover the key to a cure.

#### *In Reality:*

Fortunately, there are protocols set down by the CDC and WHO that trigger what to do during a pandemic, much of which is preventative, starting with early detection, then early isolation, and ensuring there are local public health groups on hand to

distribute vaccines. Almost all organizations now have a pandemic plan developed. Key to that is "social distancing." Businesses learned from outbreaks such as H1N1 in Asia and SARS in Canada, and now keep everyone at a safe distance from each other to minimize illness. That means more working from home. This does put a burden on networks – but organizations that have dealt with pandemics have increased their networking capacities in kind.

## **Freak Weather**

### *In the Movies:*

According to some of the more panic-inducing disaster movies, global warming isn't just a long-term concern – it's an immediate threat to all life on Earth, responsible for a massive superstorm that wreaks havoc across the globe. Violent weather causes mass destruction, suspension of air traffic, power outages, communications losses, and traffic-jammed city streets, which is just where onlookers don't want to be when a massive storm surge creates knee-deep floods, splitting people into two groups: those who have to seek shelter and those who can evacuate, fleeing as the superstorm gets even worse, dropping temperatures 10 degrees per second and instantly freezing everything in its path.

### *In Reality:*

Climate change means we'll have no shortage of freak weather events, particularly flooding of coastal areas, as we saw during Superstorm Sandy. If you look at other recent freak weather events – like the 2014 ice storms in Atlanta – there are similar implications to a contagion: employees struggle to make it in to work and the facilities themselves aren't readily accessible. Because of a lack of resources, many municipal services, including public transportation, shut down, along with schools, meaning childcare can be an issue. From a business continuity point of view, that means companies need to have plans in place so that employees can continue to work from home when accessing the facility isn't an option.

## **Earthquakes**

### *In the Movies:*

The hero may find himself up against an earthquake of epic proportions that causes massive destruction to a major city. In this case, the biggest concerns aren't just property damage, but the ensuing chaos as the population abandons their cars to flee in terror – making evacuation a special challenge even before the streets start to crack and erupt. All this while trying to navigate now-unfamiliar territory and trying to communicate a disaster response with family, friends, and colleagues. The hero has to hurry, too – because the magnitude of the super-quake will result in a giant, cresting tsunami that will tower over and then flood the city, causing massive casualties with sweeping debris and further destruction.

### *In Reality:*

The first thing to go is infrastructure, including power, gas, electricity, and communications, affecting areas hundreds of miles away. Even in earthquake-proof buildings we've seen in California and Japan, the underground infrastructure doesn't have the same shock-absorbing capabilities as the buildings themselves.

This is why planning is vitally important. Organizations should have an established backup or failover location where they can switch vital operations. Another important preparedness measure: Make sure evacuation routes are clear and staff are familiar with them.

But what about those who must remain in the impacted area? The ability to get supplies in – as we saw in Fukushima, Japan – becomes difficult. You can assume during a major earthquake that you're not going to have electricity for a week, which also means no more water. So have plenty stockpiled at work and fill up bathtubs at home to use for basic necessities.

Many communities also provide emergency notifications, which helps update everyone listening on the current state of emergency. But remember, in this event, there won't be any power – meaning no Internet and no cellular phones – so hand-cranked radios, such as those provided by the Red Cross, are also a good resource to have, along with a POT (plain old telephone). They might seem old-fashioned, but they aren't reliant on battery life or the electric company for power.

### **Get in on the Act**

These disaster movies, in addition to being exciting entertainment, can be useful jumping-off points to engage with people in the organization who don't think about business continuity often and to generate interest in preparedness. The more accurate the better, of course – there's real footage on the Internet you can use that can really drive home the point. Really, if you just put The Rock on screen, people will pay attention.

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